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Innovative Readiness Training Exercises Integral for Navy Medicine Reserve

BY VJOHNSON – APRIL 3, 2014
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By Navy Medicine Education and Training Command Public Affairs

Standing up a functional medical clinic in an unfamiliar environment in a matter of hours could prove a daunting task. But for Navy Reservists and Air National Guardsmen working for a Department of Defense-sponsored initiative designed to prepare, train and ultimately provide care to medically underserved U.S. communities, it’s a rewarding experience...



Hospital Corpsman Second Class Kevin Blake checks the blood pressure of a patient during Cajun Care 2014 in Abbeville, La. Cajun Care 2014, one of the Department of Defense's (DoD) largest community outreach efforts in the Delta Region, is an Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) mission designed to provide U.S. military medical professionals invaluable training as well as provide health care options to a medically underserved community. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist First Class Bruce Cummins)

More than 500 people are gathering at the entrance to the former Heritage Manor Care and Rehabilitation Center in Abbeville, La., a small city its estimated 12,000 citizens refer to as the “Heart of Cajun Country.”

Nearly 150 miles west of New Orleans, Abbeville – once a trade center for agricultural products,



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chiefly sugarcane, cotton and locally sold corn – stands as a testament to somewhat better times; the average family income for residents in the southwestern Louisiana parish [township] is slightly more than \$20 thousand.

These 500 people, as demographically varied as anywhere in the United States – from infants to the elderly, some in wheelchairs, others in obvious physical distress – have been waiting since the early morning hours for the opportunity to receive a service to which many in Vermillion Parish simply don’t have access, or can’t afford: health care.

As part of an Innovative Readiness Training (IRT) mission sponsored by the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (OASD) in conjunction with the Delta Regional Authority, these Abbeville, La., residents are awaiting the start of Cajun Care 2014, a nine-day multi-service mission which will ultimately provide them with medical screenings, dental care and optometric services.

Free.

According to Navy Innovative Readiness Training Program Manager Lt. Brian Raymond, the basis for any IRT mission is training for service members – at individual, service and component levels – but the dividend for the community in which the training takes place is immeasurable. We bring together top medical professionals, put them in an austere environment and setup a fully functional medical treatment clinic.

“The IRT program is a Department of Defense(DoD)-sponsored program in its 20th year,” he said. “This has a long-term value for service members – this is the type of training that goes with them throughout their entire military career, and for members of the community these missions provide a lasting effect. If we can provide a pair of glasses to someone who doesn’t have them, they’re able to see clearly and function in their environment.” He went on to say that for military members this is why they got into military medicine – to help people. Most services members apply year after year to participate. There are always more military members that volunteer to participate than we can accept.

Steeped in the roots of Civil-Military Programs, IRT missions are designed to improve military readiness while simultaneously providing quality services to communities throughout the United States. Raymond said these programs are in keeping with a long military tradition – leveraging training to benefit both units and communities within the U.S., and are strongly supported by the DoD, Congress, states and communities.

IRT medical personnel provide multiple services during missions such as Cajun Care 2014, including nursing evaluations, blood pressure screenings and diet and health consultations. Dental services include assessments and extractions. Eye exams and eye glasses manufacturing are also offered, and a pharmacy dispenses prescriptions once the patient has been seen and assessed by the medical team.

Each year, according to Raymond, there are roughly 15-20 medical IRT missions throughout different services, with the Navy Reserve typically participating in three to four annually. Raymond added that communities chosen for an IRT mission undergo a stringent and lengthy application process.

With the primary objective of IRT missions remaining training, Raymond said conditions for the mission are intentionally done in austere environments; Cajun Care 2014 was established in an abandoned nursing home, with participants sleeping in field condition-style berthing areas in available buildings nearby.

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Raymond said this sort of field environment – using available resources to accomplish a mission – can often closely mimic a real-world scenario, a mobilization and deployment any military member could face at a moment’s notice.

Cajun Care 2014 military participants were housed in existing facilities large enough to accommodate the visiting personnel – a local Veterans of Foreign Wars meeting hall, local Lion’s Club and a museum. Showering facilities were portable, food services were provided by an Air National Guard mobile kitchen unit and service members slept on cots for the duration of the exercise, all things Raymond said are integral to the austere joint training environment.

Training for service members participating in the project comes at a variety of different levels, Raymond said. The herculean task of mobilizing more than 100 service members from around the country, transporting supplies and identifying areas in which to set up facilities is an enormous undertaking, and close coordination with various Air National Guard, Navy Reserve and community and regional organizations remains key.

“My job is to manage the IRT program for the entire Navy Reserve, but I work very closely with Navy Reserve Medicine to help work through a lot of the logistics, planning, and sourcing for these missions,” he said.

Navy Medicine Education and Training Command (NMETC) is a command that is focused on medical education and training and serves as an important link in the information flow before, during and after an IRT mission, ensuring training requirements are met, personnel are fully integrated into the mission and resources are made available to participants. NMETC Reserve Component Commanding Officer Capt. Karen Kreutzberg, said the importance of these missions – citing Cajun Care 2014 – cannot be understated.

“We demonstrate what we do best here,” said Kreutzberg. “We’re organized, and we’re efficient. But there’s also a personal touch in every encounter. Our medical staff brings a lot of expertise to this, and although we measure the value of this in dollars and cents, there is also value we can’t measure, and that’s leaving an indelible impression on this community. There are so many individual stories of how these lives have been touched by our being here. We’ve really made an impact.”

According to Raymond, numbers after Cajun Care 2014, the 111 Sailors and Air National Guardsmen participating in the Feb. 25 – March 6 event saw more than 3,100 patients, conducted more than 12,000 procedures and fabricated more than 1,200 pairs of eyeglasses, all for an astounding total of more than \$1 million in medical services rendered to the community over the nine-day operation.



Cajun Care 2014 Team

As Kreutzberg had noted, however, the monetary value of services provided pales in comparison to the real-world experiences these Sailors and Airmen gain from this sort of

mission.

“Being able to train together, live together and work together is an enormous benefit to both services (Navy and Air National Guard),” Kreutzberg said. “Although our uniforms might be a bit different, we all speak the same language of practicing medicine and saving lives. Individuals involved in Cajun Care 2014 are part of a Navy and Air National Guard medical team, a concept that only serves to further integrate these two great services.”

Raymond also said personally, the IRT mission represents an opportunity to become part of a community and to provide an often much-needed service to other Americans.

Other IRT projects in the near future for the Navy Reserve include medical outreach in Alaska and Hawaii. These are areas with large populations of medical underserved people who will benefit immensely from these free services.



About vjohnson